



# Psychology

## Additional information 5.1

### Underlying beliefs and depression

The work of Albert Ellis has given clinical psychologists a powerful framework within which to work with those who are suffering from depression. Rational emotive therapy focuses on identifying the underlying beliefs and irrational thoughts that are leading to psychological problems. Froggatt (2005) details how an activating event (such as a friend passing by on the street without acknowledging us) might lead to an emotional consequence such as loneliness and depression, not because the event and the consequence are directly linked but because of inferences made about the event that trigger underlying beliefs. Any situation that has negative emotional consequences could be represented in a table with possible underlying beliefs, as shown below.

Activating event and possible inferences made about it	Underlying beliefs	Emotional and behavioural consequences
<p>My teacher hands me back an assignment; I have a failing grade.</p> <p>Inferences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my teacher doesn't like me</li> <li>my teacher thinks I am stupid</li> <li>everyone else who knows about my grade will think I am stupid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am not smart enough</li> <li>I should always do well in tests</li> <li>I should make a good impression on the teacher</li> <li>people will not value me if I do not get good grades</li> <li>if I am not getting good grades, I must be an inadequate person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sadness</li> <li>feeling of isolation</li> <li>fear about others finding out the grade</li> <li>crying when alone</li> <li>avoiding other people</li> </ul>

There are patterns to the way people make these inferences and to the kind of underlying beliefs that people have. It appears that such patterns are particularly apparent in those who are suffering from depression.



# Psychology

Examples of types of inference and what they mean are presented in the table below.

Type of inference	Meaning
black-and-white thinking	Events in life are not ambiguous: they are either bad or good. People are right or wrong.
filtering	Not all information is interpreted: things that confirm our underlying beliefs are noticed, while that which challenges our ideas is ignored.
overgeneralization	Exaggerating the frequency or significance of events: this kind of thing <i>always</i> happens; people <i>always</i> treat me like this.
mind-reading	Imagining what others are thinking, not necessarily with justification, as in the example above: My teacher thinks I am stupid. Usually mind-reading inferences support underlying beliefs.
fortune-telling	Predicting what will happen in the future, whether this involves others' behaviour or our own. In the example above: Everyone will think I am stupid.
emotional reasoning	Making arguments based on the strength of emotion, rather than logic. Fear of failure, for example, can dominate and result in expectations of failure.
personalization	Inflating personal involvement or responsibility relating to the event: for example, assuming that someone who is laughing is laughing at you.

Some of the examples of underlying beliefs provided by Froggatt that are triggered by such inferences and that lead to problematic emotional consequences are detailed below. Many of them involve a kind of fixed idea about how life should work.

- I need love and approval from those significant to me and I must avoid disapproval from any source.
- To be worthwhile as a person I must achieve, succeed at whatever I do, and make no mistakes.
- People should always do the right thing. When they behave obnoxiously, unfairly or selfishly, they must be blamed and punished.
- Things must be the way I want them to be, otherwise life will be intolerable.
- My unhappiness is caused by things that are outside my control so there is little I can do to feel any better.
- I must worry about things that could be dangerous, unpleasant or frightening otherwise they might happen.
- Events in my past are the cause of my problems and they continue to influence my feelings and behaviours now.



# Psychology

- Every problem should have an ideal solution and it is intolerable when one can't be found.

Therapists using this framework to understand depression have clear directions in which to move therapy with a depressed client (Ellis and Dryden, 1997). First, they can assist the client in finding ways to change their underlying beliefs through a process of gathering evidence that such beliefs are incorrect or damaging. Secondly, they can help the client to resist making inferences that trigger those underlying beliefs. To see an example of this in a case study of a woman with delusional thinking, click [here](#).

## **References**

Ellis A, Dryden W. (1997). *The practice of rational emotive behavior therapy*. New York: Springer

Froggatt W. (2005). A brief introduction to rational emotive behaviour therapy.

<http://rational.org.nz/prof/docs/Intro-REBT.pdf>, accessed 8 October, 2010)